

# Challenges and perspectives of the adult vocational training system in Bulgaria

**Elka Dimitrova**

PhD in Economics, Director of Labour Market Policy, Directorate of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy of Bulgaria

## SUMMARY

**This article provides a brief review of recent developments and problems in adult training of the employed and unemployed in Bulgaria. It is presented in three parts: information on legislation and the institutions; information on current problems with vocational training of the employed and unemployed; and some future measures for improving training efficiency. The findings are based on data from the National Statistical Institute (NSI), a survey on vocational training of employed at enterprises in 2005, a regular survey on the labour force, and administrative statistics from the Employment agency. This article only considers the system of vocational training for adults aged 16 to 54. Bulgaria's accession to the EU on 1 January 2007 poses new challenges, with increased opportunities for labour force mobility and level of qualification requirements.**

## Key words

Vocational training,  
employed,  
unemployed,  
legislation,  
institutions,  
shortage of qualified  
labour force

## Introduction

This article provides a brief review of recent developments and problems in adult vocational training of the employed and unemployed in Bulgaria. It is presented in three parts: information on legislation and institutions; information on recent developments and problems with vocational training of the employed and unemployed; and some future measures for improving scope and training efficiency.

The Bulgarian vocational education and training system prepares citizens for work in the economy and other spheres of public life by creating conditions for acquiring vocational qualifications and their upgrading. It includes vocational guidance, vocational training and vocational education. Vocational training targets acquiring a qualification in a profession or in part of a profession and its upgrading. The findings in this article are based on

data from the National Statistical Institute (NSI), a survey on vocational training of employed at enterprises in 2005 (¹), the labour force survey (²) and administrative statistics from the Employment agency. This article considers only the system of vocational training of adults aged 16 to 54.

National policies and actions in vocational training of adults focus on increasing investment in human capital and supplying the labour force with better education and skills. The target is to improve the adaptability of workers towards the changing economy and to increase labour productivity. Fast technological development, globalisation of financial and commodity markets, and the need for continuous renewal of goods all require flexible and efficient methods for vocational training – not only initial but also continuous training for the labour force. That is why vocational training is an increasingly important issue for today's labour market, in particular with regard to productivity, labour flexibility and quality of work.

All actions have to contribute to reaching the objectives of the Bulgarian employment strategy, the government programme and annual employment plans. As a result, Bulgaria faces a great challenge to meet the Lisbon targets of the EU and to implement the integrated guidelines for growth and jobs and the memorandum on lifelong learning.

During the past few years the Bulgarian economy has recorded stable economic growth of between 3 and 5 % per year. Growth higher than 6 % is expected for 2006 and 2007. In EU-25, growth of real GDP was 2.3 % for 2006, and the expected rate for 2007 is 2.3 % (³). The Bulgarian economy requires more investment in human capital.

Since 2002, the employment rate has increased and was 58.6 % in 2006 (⁴), 2.9 percentage points higher than 2005 but gaps remain, compared to the EU-25 rate of 64.3 %. Unemployment has been decreasing for 10 years reaching 9.0 % in 2006. The rate of registered unemployed (⁵) has also

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(¹) In June 2005, the Bulgarian National Statistical Institute carried out a survey of vocational training in enterprises. The survey method is in compliance with the grant conditions contracted between NSI and Eurostat in the frame of MBP Phare 2003. The survey was organised in the context of the LLL concept, and covered CVT, which enterprises organised for their employees in 2004, as well as IVT measures.

The main goal of the survey is to satisfy the information demand of bodies developing labour force policy on continuing vocational training provided by enterprises for their employees. As source of the sampling frame, the last up-dated version of the Statistical Business Register was used. The sampling frame comprises 53 060 enterprises in 24 NACE categories with five or more employees in 2004, allocated to 92 strata. The strata are defined by the cross-classification of 20 NACE categories and 4 size classes (according to the number of employees: 5-9, 10-49, 50-249, 250+). In each stratum, the sample is drawn by simple random sampling (without replacement). The sample size is calculated to assure a maximum length of half the 95%-confidence interval of 0.25 for the estimated parameters. The calculated total sample size is 3 813 enterprises.

(²) The survey is carried out by the National Statistical Institute according to ILO recommendations and Eurostat requirements. It is a quarterly continuous survey providing average quarterly results; the sample size includes 18 000 households.

(³) Employment in Europe 2006/ European Commission Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, Unit D1 Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2006, p. 249.

(⁴) Source: National Statistical Institute, data from labour force surveys 2005 and 2006.

fallen. It was 11.5 % in 2005 and 9.6 % in 2006. In 2005, the average number of registered unemployed was 424 381 and 64.5 % of all unemployed were without profession. In 2006, the unemployed decreased to 356 054 but the share of unemployed without profession did not change – 64.8 %.

Despite raising labour productivity over past years, great disparity with other EU Member States remains. One reason for the productivity is insufficient participation of the Bulgarian population <sup>(6)</sup> in lifelong learning. For example, only 1.3 % of the population aged 25 to 64 took part in education and training in 2005, while the percentage for EU-25 was 10.2 %. The highest level of participation in LLL is observed in Sweden – 32.1 %, and the lowest in Greece – 1.9 %. In Romania this percentage is 1.6 %, and in the new EU Member States (10) it varies between 3.9 % (Hungary) and 7.9 % (Latvia) <sup>(7)</sup>. The Lisbon goal for 2010 is 12.5 %.

Economic growth is sensitive to the stock and quality of human capital. A high-skilled and adaptable labour force is a factor in technology diffusion and innovation in work organisation and management. This leads to higher labour productivity and economic competitiveness (with focus on the new start of the Lisbon strategy). Currently, the Bulgarian economy is creating more and better jobs but it also needs an adaptable, flexible and qualified labour force. Legislation for providing it has already been created. Corporate investment in human resources is critical for investment in human capital, both for society and the national economy. Investment in human resources at corporate level is not yet common practice and the level of this type of investment is rather low.

Vocational training of the unemployed is a priority of labour policy but the low level of education and motivation, especially of the long-term unemployed (in 2006 they were 57.2 % of the total number of unemployed) require more efforts and action from the State and social partners.

## Legislation for adult vocational training <sup>(8)</sup>

Since 1999, a new vocational education and training Act has regulated public relations in vocational training of adults and the rights of individuals to vocational education and training in accordance with their personal interests and abilities. The Act determines the conditions for the functioning and development of the vocational education and training system based

<sup>(5)</sup> Source: data for 2005 and 2006 from the administrative statistics of the Employment Agency of Bulgaria.

<sup>(6)</sup> The total population of Bulgaria in 2005 was 7 718 750, the population aged 15 to 64 was 4 814 000 (62.4 % of the total population). Source: National Statistical Institute.

<sup>(7)</sup> Eurostat, lifelong learning data.

<sup>(8)</sup> Vocational training is as follows:

(a) initial vocational training to acquire a qualification in a profession or to part of a profession;

(b) continuing vocational training to improve a qualification in a profession or part of a profession.

on cooperation between institutions, local authorities and social partners. According to the Act there are four levels of vocational qualifications and six framework programmes for training. The Act also stipulates the institutions <sup>(9)</sup> providing vocational training and introduces a requirement for private vocational training centres to be licensed by the National Agency for Vocational Education and Training (NAVET). The VET Act also stipulates State educational requirements (standards) and the rules for managing and funding the VET system. The last amendments to the Act made in 2005 transpose the EU directives on regulated professions <sup>(10)</sup>.

The Employment Promotion Act, adopted in 2002, also regulates the vocational training of adults (both employed and unemployed). It determines the functions of the National Advisory Council for Vocational Training of the Labour Force (NACVTLF), State subsidies for vocational training, the right of unemployed trainees to receive grants, the functions of the Employment Agency to organise and fund training from the State budget for active labour market policy. During the past two years amendments to the Act expanded the scope of training institutions to have the right to provide training for employed and unemployed adults by including vocational schools. Grants for management training were offered to unemployed people setting up micro enterprises or starting their own businesses in the agricultural sector. The institutions responsible for the vocational training of adults are the Ministry of Education and Science, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, the National Agency for Vocational Education and Training, and the Employment Agency.

Employers and trade union organisations also play an important role in developing and implementing national policy on vocational training of adults. The social partners participate in many councils and bodies at national, regional and local levels, such as the Economic and Social Council (in 2005 the Council drew up an opinion on the problems of vocational education and training in Bulgaria <sup>(11)</sup>), the National Employment Promotion Council, NACVTLF, NAVET's managing board, regional employment committees, cooperation councils for labour offices. The social partners are involved in developing and implementing labour market programmes and projects for training and employing disadvantaged groups.

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<sup>(9)</sup> Training institutions are: vocational schools, secondary schools, colleges, arts schools and vocational training centres, junior high schools, primary, general secondary, secondary special and sports schools, determined by State educational standards. Vocational training can also be provided by ministries, municipalities, employers' organisations, trade unions and employers.

<sup>(10)</sup> Directives on the right to provide services by lawyers, architects, dentists, doctors, nurses, midwives, chemists, veterinarians, etc.

<sup>(11)</sup> Economic and Social Council of Bulgaria, 2005.

## Recent developments and problems in adult vocational training in Bulgaria

### **Vocational training for the employed**

In the 1990s, the years of transition to a market economy, the vocational training system of the centralised State economy was quickly destroyed, but the establishment of a new, market-oriented system took time.

After a period of rather strong decline, a new system was created. Today vocational training for the employed is organised by employers, trade unions, the Employment Agency, non-governmental organisations, etc. The findings of this chapter are based on data from the National Statistical Institute (NSI) and the survey on vocational training of the employed in enterprises in 2005. That year, about 53 060 enterprises, firms and organisations were included in the NSI survey on continuing vocational training. Collected data refer to the year 2004. Employers in 8 037 (15.1 %) public and 45 023 (84.9 %) private companies were interviewed. Only 14 199 enterprises or 26.8 % of the total number of estimated enterprises had organised vocational training for their staff. This number is insufficient but it varies considerably according to the size of the enterprise and the number of staff: for example, 70.0 % of enterprises with more than 250 employees provided training, but only 18.5 % of micro enterprises. The training included mainly instructions, job rotation, self-study, etc. The share of employees included in training activities is small – only 14.2 % of employees took part in training in 2004.

There are various reasons for these modest results. For example, employers only invest in training their staff when they are sure of a return on their investment by obtaining higher staff productivity, quality performance and innovation. Vocational training is organised mainly in cases where new products or services, new production methods, or reorganisation of the enterprise's activities are introduced. The small number of employees included in training can be explained by the low level of innovation in enterprises (for the considered period, new products or services were introduced in only 8.6 % of enterprises, only 6.7 % of enterprises implemented new technologies and only 2.6 % made structural changes). Economic insecurity is the main reason many enterprises have not developed plans for the future. They do not have plans for future investments and staff development; they rely only on favourable economic conditions to survive. In Bulgaria, total labour costs are high because of the insurance burden, and additional investments in staff training would only increase costs further. Employers suffer significant losses when trained employees move to other enterprises for higher salaries. In particular, few employers know how to avoid such losses by signing an agreement on the rights and obligations of both employer and employee in advance.

The insufficient number of trained employees is also due to the fact that only one fifth of employers assess the qualification and skills of their staff.

Staff assessments are carried out annually mainly in big public enterprises. During the three year period between 2002 and 2004, managers of one quarter of enterprises needed to train their staff in new skills. Often managers are not aware of the benefits of improving their employees' skills or how to find a training provider. Four out of five managers interviewed are convinced that skills can be improved during work, 'learning-by-doing'.

About 58.4 % of interviewed employers believe they can recruit qualified workers with the skills needed on the labour market. The high number of unemployed creates the illusion of a high level of supply; but employers meet difficulties when looking for a qualified worker because most unemployed are unskilled, poorly educated and motivated. There is a shortage of qualified workers such as technicians, mechanics and workers in sectors of rapid development such as construction, tourism and textiles.

Half the managers recognise the importance of VET and 52.1 % intend to organise training for their staff. But they do not understand the need for developing training plans (only 6.6 % of enterprises had such plans in 2004), allocating funds for training (only 4.6 % of enterprises allocated such funds in 2004) and creating in-company training centres (only 12.4 % of large enterprises run their own training centres).

The lack of company development plans determines the lack of training plans for employees. According to the survey quoted above, only 11.1 % of interviewed enterprises plan to provide vocational training for their employees in 2006 and 2007, 31.7 % would probably provide training, but more than a half of the enterprises, 57.2 %, do not plan to organise any vocational training. It is disturbing that only 6.9 % of micro enterprises plan to provide training for their staff to acquire new skills and two thirds of micro enterprises (65.2 %) respond that they have no intention of undertaking such actions.

For almost one third of employers (32.6 %), employees themselves are responsible for acquiring new or better skills. Because of low incomes, employees' participation in training courses paid by themselves is limited. Most employees do not practise lifelong learning. Signed agreements for training between employers and employees represented by trade unions is rare (only 3.0 % of enterprises have signed such an agreement, mainly large enterprises with a staff of more than 250).

Training impact is evaluated in only 30.1 % of all enterprises, in half of large enterprises (54.1 %) and in only 16.2 % of micro enterprises which shows the importance of vocational training. Evaluation is based on data from training certificates or from evaluation forms filled in by trainees. Most enterprises (69.9 %) have not evaluated training impact because they do not consider it important.

Data on the positions of trained staff show that more often training is organised for managers and major group professionals. In about 52.1 % of enterprises training qualified support staff was included, whereas in only 14.4 % of enterprises was training for low-qualified workers included. The table below shows the training provided most often.

Short-term training such as sharing experience and giving instructions during or before work, are the preferred forms of training for 66.8 % of employers interviewed. Such training is low-cost, of short duration and usually gives immediate results, which is why the time spent in training is only 0.15 % of the total time off work in 2004. The time spent in training on average is 17.2 hours per participant. It is positive that about 31.5 % of enterprises apply other forms of training such as self-learning, learning by correspondence or distance learning using the Internet, etc.

Most enterprises in the survey sample, 73.2 %, have never organised training to improve the qualifications of their employees. The main reasons are as follows:

- according to 78.1 % of managers, the skills of their employees respond to the needs of the enterprise;
- in 60.3 % of enterprises (<sup>12</sup>), newly hired staff have the needed skills;
- in about 21.9 % of enterprises, high cost is the main reason for not organising continuing vocational training.

Summarising, managers of small and medium-sized enterprises are not very active in organising training for their staff. The situation in large enterprises is much better and this is important because more than half the employed work in large enterprises and have the opportunity to develop their

**Table 1**

Training in:	Number of courses	Percentage of total	Duration of training
Total	48 091	100.0	100.0
Foreign languages	1 777	3.7	7.0
Sales and marketing	4 168	8.7	5.4
Accountancy and financing	5 534	11.5	5.5
Management	4 721	9.8	6.6
Office work	838	1.7	1.4
Personal skills and working life	3 055	6.4	5.3
Computer literacy	4 771	9.9	9.8
IT	1 001	2.1	2.2
Equipment and production	8 846	18.4	22.5
Safety and health at work	4 584	9.5	5.3
Services	651	1.4	3.1
Other	8 145	16.9	25.9

Source: Vocational training in enterprises; National Statistical Institute; Sofia, 2006, page 40.

(<sup>12</sup>) More than one answer is possible; as a result the sum of the percentage figures exceeds 100.

vocational skills. Incentives for employers to invest in training staff are insufficient. Branch organisations and trade unions could be more active in implementing lifelong learning policy.

In 2005, the Employment Agency organised training for 5 290 employed in micro and small enterprises, and for employees lacking the required qualification to work with new technologies and changed conditions of manufacturing, etc. The State subsidy per training course per employee is determined every year in the national employment action plan (NEAP) for 2006 and 2007 it is EUR 125 from the State budget with the rest paid by employers. Training centres are selected following a tender procedure or by employers themselves. In some cases the impact of training on employment is limited by low motivation and the insufficient educational level of trainees. Sometimes training is not delivered attractively, without using new methods of teaching and without the active participation of trainees.

The low living standard and insufficient incomes of low-educated persons limit their participation in training courses paid by themselves and other forms of lifelong learning activities. At the same time, despite the opportunities provided by the VET Act, the system for validating knowledge obtained through informal learning has not been developed.

### **Training of unemployed people**

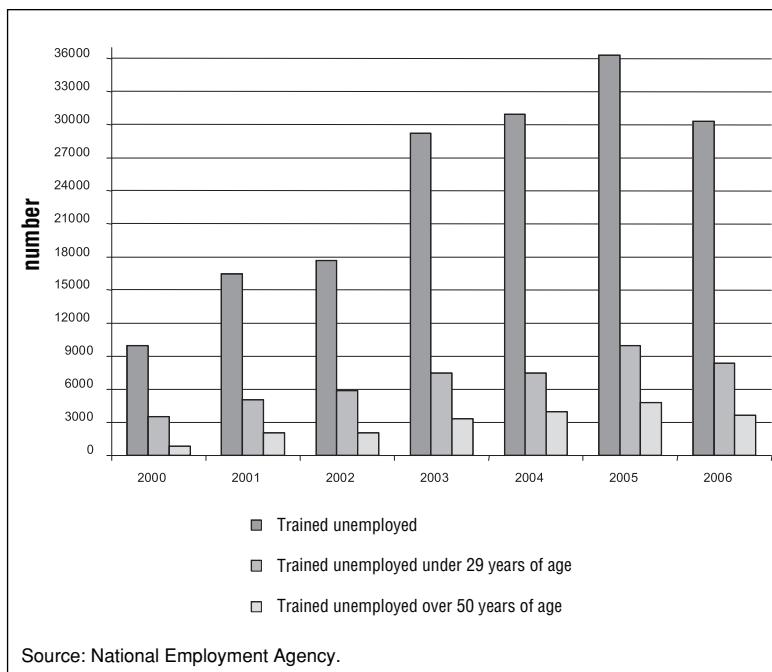
The system of training unemployed people is better organised and funded. Its scope expands constantly because employability of the unemployed is a major priority of the NEAP in recent years. Various programmes and measures for vocational training are included annually in NEAP. The Employment Agency organises training for more than 70 professions. The list of professions is changed every year according to labour force demand. Aiming to ensure equal access, training provided is free of charge for unemployed people, covered by a State subsidy. To encourage participation, the unemployed are provided with resources to cover accommodation and travel costs. The subsidy for training is determined annually in the NAEP (EUR 250 for 2006 and 2007).

In 2005, the average number of registered unemployed was 424 381 and about 36 344 unemployed people (<sup>13</sup>) were included in vocational training, or 8.6 % of all unemployed people. In 2006, there were 30 335 or 8.5 % (in 2006 the average number of registered unemployed was 356 054). As a result of training in 2005, 73.8 % of the trained unemployed found a new job immediately or shortly after training. This shows that training provided corresponded to a great extent to labour force demand. Of the trained unemployed, 47.9 % were young people up to 29 years of age, and 55.6 % of them had secondary level of education. A good practice is internship of three months for some trainees (70 % of all trainees in 2005). The knowledge and skills acquired by trainees are tested in real work conditions and they have the opportunity to be hired if job positions become vacant. During internship,

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(<sup>13</sup>) National Employment Agency.

**Figure 1.** Unemployed included people in vocational training

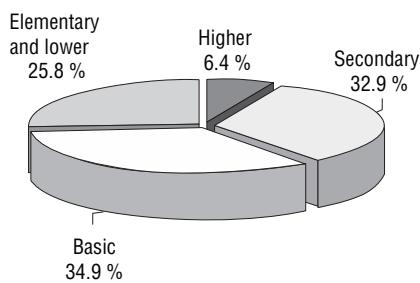


trainees receive the minimum salary and are insured.

Most unemployed have participated in courses for computer operators, cooks, experts in accountancy, hairdressers, producers of bread and pastry, waiters and waitresses, and barmen. Foreign language training is also provided.

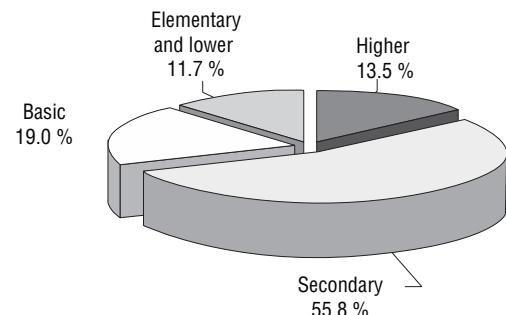
**Figure 2**

**Educational structure  
of unemployed in 2006**



**Figure 3**

**Educational structure of trained  
unemployed in 2006**



Source: Administrative statistics of the Employment Agency 2006.

Selecting unemployed people for vocational training courses organised by the Employment Agency is made in accordance with the tasks outlined in their individual action plans. To improve access of unemployed people from disadvantaged groups to training as well as to better link their individual needs to the training provided a new method for selecting unemployed people for vocational training was adopted in 2006. It gives priority to the low-skilled unemployed, young unemployed and people with disabilities.

The unemployed have showed higher interest in programmes for: computer training of youths and women; literacy and vocational training of Roma people; vocational training of early school leavers; training in entrepreneurship, etc. Vocational training is also provided in Phare programme projects (14).

Licensed private centres for vocational training are increasingly important for training the unemployed. At the beginning of 2007, according to NAVET's data these centres number more than 400 (15), but most are located in Sofia, Plovdiv and Varna. Vocational training centres provided training for more than 50 000 unemployed and employed in 2005. Training was mainly in 'business management and administration', 'hotels and restaurants', followed by 'motor vehicles, ships and aircraft' and 'metalworking and machine-building' or in 91 professions. Many people were trained as cooks, welders, security guards, fitters, construction workers, waiters, barmen, office secretaries and tailors. Training courses for part of a profession predominate. About 2 000 training courses were funded by the Employment Agency and about 1 000 by employers.

Despite the successful results achieved in vocational training, there are still problems connected to quality assurance. Short-term training is preferred by the unemployed because it gives them a chance to find a job.

The vocational training system is still centralised, with funding provided by the State. The number of private vocational training providers is rapidly growing but some offer disorganised training, which is reflected in the quality of training. Training programmes are not followed, trainers are not trained to train adults, practical training is insufficient and outdated facilities are used. Information and communication technologies are insufficiently used in the training process, as access to the Internet is limited. Sometimes there is a shortage of specialised textbooks and training materials.

Simultaneously, training effectiveness is limited by low motivation and the low educational level of the long-term unemployed. As a result, vocational training of the unemployed is preceded by activities such as motivation training, literacy courses, vocational guidance, etc.

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(14) Phare programme projects – 'Clearing the path for youth employment', 'Alternative employment' 'Human resources development and employment promotion', programmes funded by the Social Investment Fund, etc.

(15) Annual bulletin 2005 of NAVET; Sofia, 2006; Annual report of the activities of NAVET in 2005, p. 7-40, Analysis of the information of 2005 received from centres for vocational training in Bulgaria.

## Future actions in adult vocational training

One of the main policy priorities set in the chapter on 'Employment' of the first Bulgarian reform programme is improving labour force employability and improving lifelong learning.

In adult vocational training new strategic documents are to be implemented, an adult training strategy was developed in 2006 and a lifelong learning strategy will be developed in 2007.

The main objective of the Bulgarian operational programme 'human resources development', which provides the framework for receiving funds from the European Social Fund (ESF), is improving the quality of life through improving human capital, increasing employment and labour productivity, and social inclusion. One of the major priorities is raising the quality of education and training and providing better access to quality education and lifelong learning.

More effective measures will be taken to ensure training in key competences for a more flexible and adaptable labour force, training in entrepreneurship, training for reducing illiteracy and increasing employability of the labour force with low levels of education and without qualifications. As regards implementing the integrated guidelines for growth and jobs of the EU, employment programmes will be directed at the most vulnerable groups on the labour market. Vocational training will be a component of the programmes directed at reconciling work and family life. In-company training will be encouraged through various tax incentives, subsidies for training a larger number of employed people, opportunities for more flexible working hours aiming at combining work and learning, providing counselling services to employers about the rights and obligations of trainees.

According to the national strategy for continuing vocational training 2005-2010 (<sup>16</sup>), the main priority is improving access to continuing vocational training by developing training forms close to home (distance training, e-learning); ensuring opportunities for combining work and study and developing specific measures for disadvantaged groups on the labour market.

To ensure high quality of continuing vocational training, actions are envisaged for improving the organisation of vocational training for the unemployed, updating curricula and training methods, introducing a system for controlling and evaluating training outcomes. Existing State educational standards (labour standards) are being improved and developing new ones is based on job requirements.

The system for identifying employers' labour force needs with specific qualifications developed under a Phare project will be applied to the whole country, including some forecasting. It will be used as a basis for developing training plans, vocational fields and State enrolment plans for students at secondary and higher schools.

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(<sup>16</sup>) Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, 2004.

To achieve a close link between initial and continuing training a national qualifications framework will be developed in accordance with the European qualification framework. It will contribute to achieving transparency and recognition of qualifications. International experience will be studied as well as opportunities for validating knowledge and skills obtained through non-formal and informal learning.

Realising effective cooperation and coordination between key institutions in vocational training and the labour market is important. Suitable incentives and mechanisms will be introduced for sharing expenses and responsibilities for improving the level and effectiveness of investments in human resources through reducing the tax burden and introducing appropriate guarantees for spending on staff building. Collective labour bargaining will be improved for labour force training with active involvement of social partners, which is a requirement of the Copenhagen declaration. Greater decentralisation of funding of the VET system is important for attracting funds from the ESF.

To improve the link between education, training and the labour market, and in accordance with Luxembourg Council 2004 recommendations, an integrated information system will be established, with data on trained people by profession, by acquired level of vocational qualification, and with information on training institutions and trainings providers and training courses organised by the Employment Agency. Feedback on the percentage of trained people who find job is important for the VET system. Such information will be provided through the Employment Agency's information system and the National Insurance Institute.

According to the requirements of the Copenhagen Declaration, it is important for Bulgarian policy-makers and experts to know the best practices of other Member States and participate in peer reviews and discussions on the problems of LLL. The active participation of Bulgaria in the new integrated programme of EU progress and especially in the EU programme 'Lifelong learning' could support these processes substantially.

## Conclusion

There is broad consensus in Bulgarian society that human capital is a key engine for growth in the knowledge-driven economy. Legislation and the adopted strategies, plans and programmes, provide opportunities for improving human capital and activating lifelong learning, but they have to be realised through joint efforts of all players concerned. Bulgaria's accession to the EU on 1 January 2007 presents new challenges connected to increased opportunities for labour force mobility and requirements of enterprises to introduce EU standards. While large companies in Bulgaria have progressed in this field, small and medium-sized enterprises need support from the State and social partners in increasing the quality of their human resources. It is very important that envisaged future activities in lifelong learn-

ing are carried out. The result will be sustainable growth of productivity, adaptability of enterprises, creation and adoption of new technologies. The higher employability of unemployed people as a result of training could partially cover the lack of skilled labour in some sectors.

Expected results from the coherent policy to be implemented by the end of 2010 include a considerable increase in the level of participation of adults in LLL, increased employment rate and overcoming the shortage of qualified labour. ■

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